

# The Early Bird

BY HENRY M. RIDEOUT.

"The heathen Chinese is peculiar," observed the second officer. "See the ingenuity of that feller at the winch now."

On a white-hot deck the coolies dodged and clattered. "Arrah!" they shouted, peering over the side into the churning lurch. The chain ran down rattling, till they signaled the winch to stop, with yellow hands waving abstractedly and a wail of "Ahh!" Grunts and thuds rose out of the lurch in a thin but pungent cloud of dust; then the watchers at the rail cried "Vrrra-vrrra-vrrra!" in frenzy, the chain clanked taut, and a giant sing-fur of brown gunny bags swung in-board with a rush, poised over the black yawn of the hatch, twirled and suddenly dropped out of sight to the hollow iron music of the winch and a polyglot scream of "Kubberdar-arrra-guar'naba'o!"

The winch boy—an odd little aged Chinaman in a pastoral straw bonnet, with a sheath in sticking out like a rudimentary tail stump, from under his blue dungaree—had hardly exerted a muscle; instead of the fuming, sweating tug which a white man gives the lever, he had laid on a casual hand and done the trick. Two cricks, lashed with rope yarn at the proper point, swung below; and a "Hylam" coolie had scored one mechanical triumph over a Glasgow firm.

"Now that's ingenuity," said the second. He paused to kick at Bengali boxwallah down the ladder, and followed to cut the sampan loose. Shrieks of protest—"Oh, zoolum!—Zubberdust!"—rose and drifted astern over the gleaming harbor. The second remounted, mopping sweat from under his pith helmet, and muttering—"black swine, chaffing all the paint off my standards!"

"Ingenuity," resumed. "That's what counts."

This he elaborated after tiffin, in Mac's cabin against the silent engines. We smoked Mrs. Middleton's cheroots, scratched prickly heat, and cursed Chittagong.

"But American ingenuity's the most ingenious," he declared, patriotically. "What? Oh, Scots be hanged. Hoot, toot, mean by it? Definition? Why, sure, I mean—that quality which—er—which promotes the general happiness with the least fuss to all concerned. There you are. Now let me talk."

And there is the second story: Before I was in steam in this way, I knocked about in oil ships a spell and fought some in the Philippines, and fore that prospected considerable in Colorado and China and all over. Well, a crowd of us boys was sent up into Sumatra by some Dutchmen—Padang highlands, and way up in from Fort de Kock. We found some gold and lots of dengue fever. But the Dutchmen naturally didn't pay us as per contract, and we got back to Batavia with something over 500 guilders between four of us, for all our worldly goods. We put up at the best hotel, and figured how long it would last.

We ought to moved out quick, but after the boogie thing was so interesting in that little Dutch burg that we kept staying on. Seemed like a metropolis. And presently, what with circuses, and biographs, and mylords, and Duck-and-Doveest and—entertainments, we found that a conservative estimate left us 354 guilders in debt by the time the next boat sailed, a Chinese boat and deck passage at that. "Twan't altogether our fault," we'd have cleared out and been all right. I've always argued, if the king of Siam hadn't come over to investigate Buddhist ruins and paddy growing. He was hot on modern improvements then; traveled in a yacht, a converted hooker, that was improved some. He stopped at the same hotel, of course, with a push of courtiers and fifty-two wives, a full pack and him the little joker. Everything blossomed out gay at once—one lone state feast, of course we stayed. The queens all wore silk knickerbockers, fifty-two of 'em; an interesting sight, a floating round and pining at the windows. We stayed.

No prospect of more money, or even jobs. The consul's one of the whitest men in the east, and helped us a whole lot, but he didn't hold out any rosy delusions of grandeur much more. Finally, I remember, we all sat up late one night, looking round at the ground floor verandas and listening to tree lizards a-calling "To-kay, To-kay!" the way they do. It makes you thirsty if you like sweet wines. Well, about midnight we'd exhausted ever profit and were knocking each other a good deal. All the king's wives had disappeared long ago, upstairs, and everything was dull and we were peevish.

"I see a way of financing ourselves," I think," says Sam Bird. "Perhaps." He was a big California boy, talked slow and lazy, a farmer-looking boy, but one of the best. "Don't go knocking this way. Wait till tomorrow or next day."

"Just what we been doing," snaps out Bassett. "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, shifts into the lean and slithered pantaloons." (Bassett came from the United States, of course, where, and he knew Shakespeare by the back-little chap, big spectacles, thin face and a nose as pointed as a lead pencil—one more whittle and the point'd break; a little sharp nose and a little sharp voice through it—No! Not Shakespeare; Bassett!) "That's what you lazy Pacific slopers are always saying," he tells Sam. "Tomorrow, manana, besok—bad as these goo-gos."

I knew what Bird's game was, I thought, and said so. "You'll get your guilders—if you have luck. What's that in our crisis?"

"Rebbers, you all I said," draws his Sam Bird. "Don't get hot." And he leans back and smokes his Palomco, and looks up dreamy at the royal apartments windows in the second story, through the liana creepers. "It's taxidermatist, anyway."

"Don't you go figuring on any flirtation motifs with the forty-second queen," says Bassett, following his glance. "That don't blong honorable pligin."

"This ain't romance," says Bird, quite disgusted. "You never see things as they are. Bassy always bookish. This is an awful cool proposition."

We allowed it was, too, and told him what we thought of him for rousing false hopes over a lot of mangy snakeskins that wouldn't realize our right to Tandjong Priok in a bullock cart, let alone a sado. Bassett got real bitter about it.

"I begin to wish you'd left me behind at Bencoolen," he says.

"So do I," agrees Sam Bird, promptly and hearty.

"I'd a married a nice native girl in a Sumatra wrapper," says Bassett, letting on not to hear, "and settled down in a nice little campong; plenty of rice,

and nothing to do but sing the Koran at nightfall, under the bamboo tree. And here we are, beachcombers, in Batavia; and we'll starve to death, and the Dutch'll give our effects to their orphans' home, and—finish!"

"No orphan would be grumbling enough to want 'em," says Bird; "and no girl with good eyesight would ratify that first scheme." They went on to pass very low remarks, and got to be in earnest; and when Dan Towers, who'd been homesick for some time, said he'd never see Ashtabula, O., again, and Bird said there was always compensations, we nearly had a fight; cause Dan really liked Ashtabula. Ain't it a funny world?

Well, we all got sore, and went to bed blue, in those small marble sepulchre Turkish bath bedrooms, about 2 in the morning. Before daybreak I woke a little and heard a thrashing round in Sam Bird's room next door, and then saw his kimono flapping 'cross the compound on his way back from the bath. I sung out, "Go to bed, idiot!" and rolled over to sleep.

Along dawn I woke again, and this time I heard a frightful fog—strong men cursing, engines blowing off and horns tooting like the steam tram was running wild in the hotel yard. I stuck my head outdoors—out popped all the others, Bassett's sharp beak, and old Dan's big frowzy nut and a long line of bullet headed Dutch planters all down the veranda, like horses looking out of their stalls. And there under the big banyan tree, puffing and churning and emitting smoke, was a ridiculous little red motor car. First one we'd ever seen in the east. A six-footer in white and a top bigger'n the machine itself sat at the wheel jerking on them tell-tale-handle things and writhing round.

When the sleep cleared out of my eyes I saw it was Sam Bird.

Bassett was always quick at sizing things up.

"He's gone off his head," says he. "Heat's been too much for him. Thought he acted queer last night." We all yelled together: "What you up to?"

"She'll run all right," sings out Bird.

To prove it, she backed through a wire fence into the banyan roots and gave up with a snort. Sam took a monkey wrench and a spanner out of his pocket, pulled off his coat, and disappeared under the body there in the jungle.

We three ran out in our pajamas—

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sett, while we rested in our long chairs. "Notice him throw me around? He couldn't 'a' done that with his normal strength. Go on yourself, Dan! I say he's! I know better. He's by the nut-beat and fever and worry."

All of a sudden we thought so, too, when the horn belled like an Australian steer, and the car started out from the banyan, and came bumping down our way, laying a trail of this axle grease stuff all along the footpath. Honk-onk-onk, goes the horn, and the rattle was like a steam roller full of iron rods, and sich. Sam sat up dignified, steering round and round the compound full speed, slewing the corners, and doing a Judgment day on the trumpet. You know the noise a fat woman's poodle makes when he breathes? That car was like an elephant suffering same way. There wasn't a piece of silence left in Well-tveden. It was a pretty race, and when Sam, without slowing engines, dodged the pet orang-utan (who'd come out into the road from behind the bath house suddenly), why, all the Dutchmen laughed, and so did the Javanese boys, and we cheered. It was such neat work, and the orang-utan looked so surprised. Heads began to show in the windows of the royal suite.

By this time the uproar was something awful, till Sam ported his helm and went boiling down the avenue again, out the gate, and we could hear distant honks floating off past the Harmonie club.

By breakfast time he wasn't back. At table we had nothing to say except our friend was a wealthy and eccentric young man, with a passion for taking out his motor car in the early morning. The manager had quieted down; apparently no complaints issued by royalty.

When he came back, about 9 o'clock, he left the car under the tree and came and had coffee in our veranda, acting like himself again almost.

"Now, then," says Bassett, "make your talk. What's the game?"

"How much cash have we got?" asks

him.

"We've got about 354 guilders," says Bird.

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Frenchmen came out of their shop-civilized-looking fellows they were—and Sam and they all began to talk Malay at once. They laid it out how chupput she could last a kilometre, and Sam didn't know how long a kilometre was, and when they tried to explain it in Malay it was worse than before. And Sam had to coin terms like "monkey-wrench-pooliah" to express his feelings toward the health of her interior. By 11 o'clock they came down to fifteen hundred guilders.

Bird stood firm and stern for twelve hundred.

"Easy, Sam," I says. "I followed you blind so far, but I don't like this. Where's the one thousand?"

"Shut up," he says; then translates to the Frenchman. "My friend is right. He is wise in these things, and says she won't last three days, and we'd have to send to Europe for the parts."

They weakened a little, shrugging their shoulders just to show they didn't care, when they did.

"Twelve hundred," repeats Sam, "and the snakeskins."

Those reptiles may have turned the balance, for they really were all right, and we all knew it; only certain thing in the whole transaction. So at 11:30, with one tremendous shrug, it closed at Sam's price. He paid down the skins and the 500 guilders, promised the rest that afternoon, and we started back in our car. She broke down twice. Sam really looked worried then, but after a lot of prying and crawling and hammering, off she limped again.

"Those Frenchmen threw her on the scrapheap six months ago," he said. "Lying in an open-face go-down didn't do her a bit of good. I studied her, though, and the situation." Close-mouthed chap, Sam was.

Next morning he had a young Siamese courier out with him, and that afternoon was teaching him to steer, while Dan Towers and Bassett sat bitterly computing how much this spectacle cost us per day. I didn't tell 'em she belonged to us; it saved trouble.

Next day the same lessons went on, and the orang-utan took to the banyan, mastheaded till after dark. The third day Sam didn't climb in at all, but the young Siamese did, and an older man in pale pink and green silks and a London helmet, and a servant up